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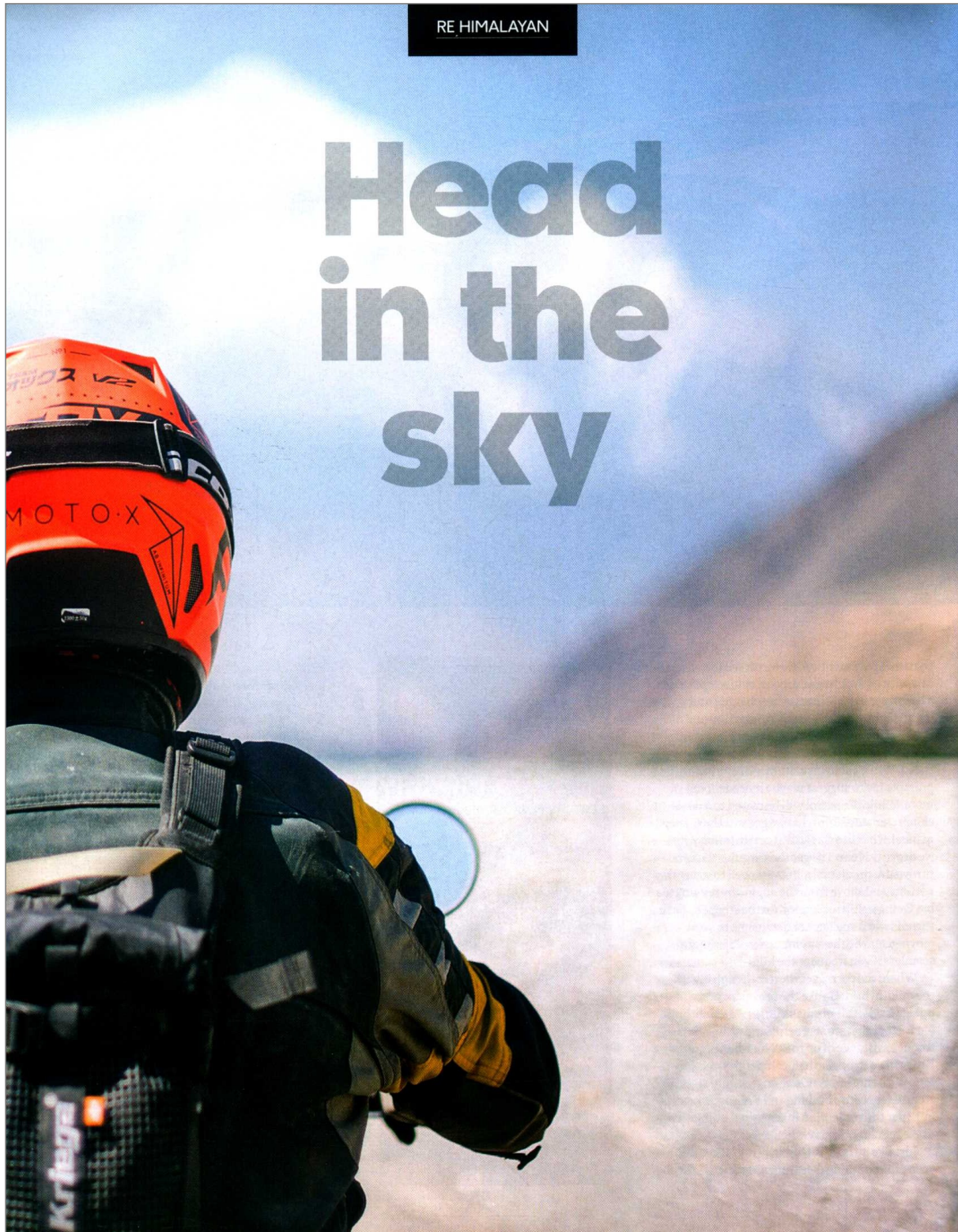
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068 Mustang adventure

A Royal Enfield Himalayan at one of the world's most picturesque locales. We signed up as soon as we heard

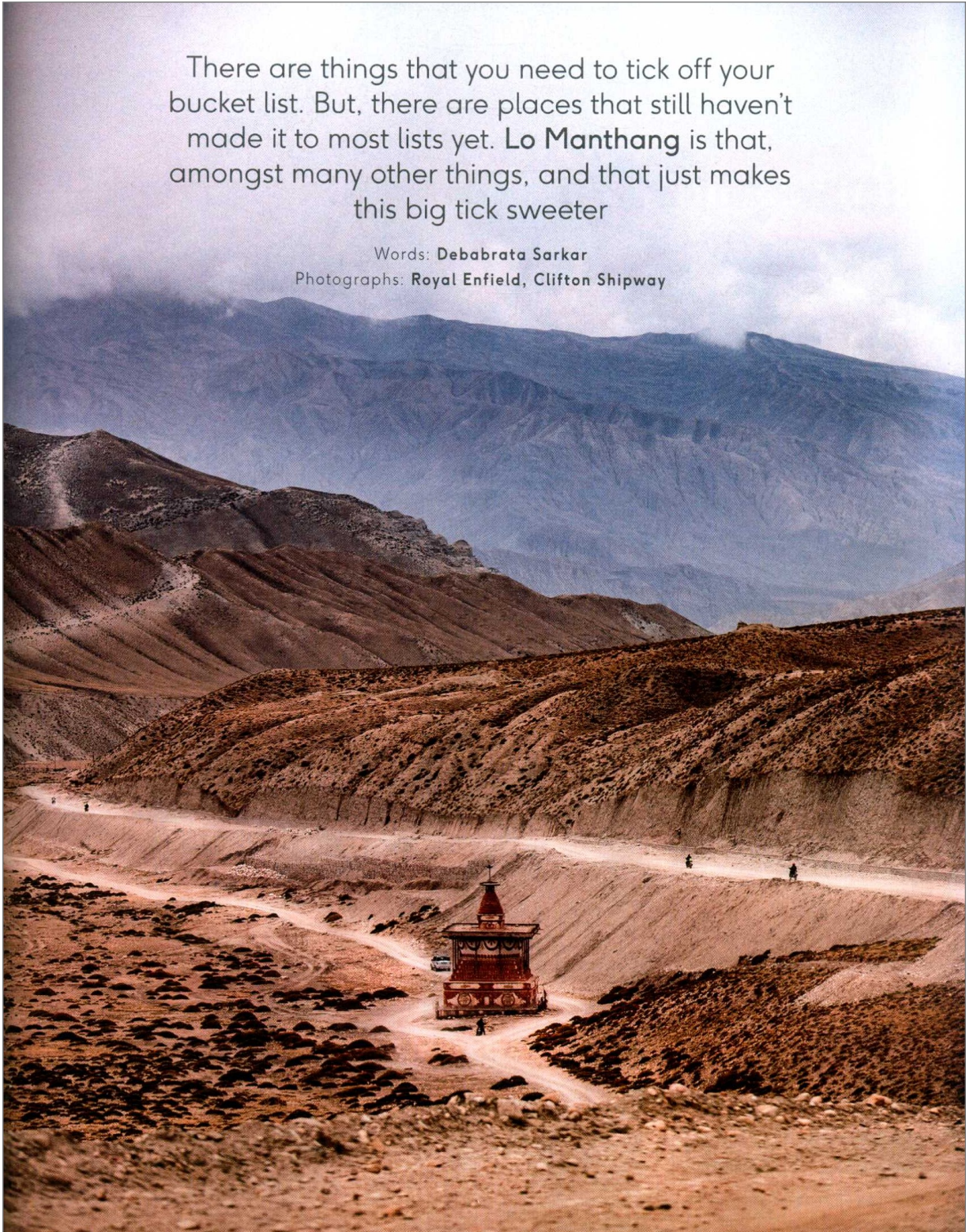
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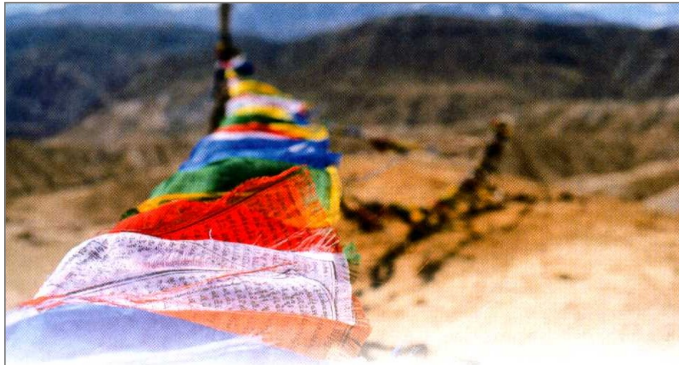
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There are things that you need to tick off your bucket list. But, there are places that still haven't made it to most lists yet. **Lo Manthang** is that, amongst many other things, and that just makes this big tick sweeter

Words: Debabrata Sarkar
Photographs: Royal Enfield, Clifton Shipway



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Sitting outside a coffee shop in the ancient walled city of Lo Manthang, at a rather dizzying twelve-and-a-half thousand feet above mean sea level, a slice of apple pie was the last thing I expected to be see at the store window. Especially given the fact that the last couple of hours, on the road to Lo Manthang, had everything from water crossings, to deep sand, with a few steep inclines thrown in. My riding suit is far from presentable in this spotless little village and there are distinctly crunchy bits stuck between my teeth. While I do my best to contain my surprise about the apple pie, a piping hot cup of espresso was being shot out of a very elaborate Italian machine. There isn't a drop of tarmac for days, in the direction of Nepal, and cellphone coverage can be termed sketchy at best, but the people of Lo have the good life sorted out. This spotless kingdom has streets lined with slate and mud-houses painted a brilliant white. A tall wall keeps the palace and the city protected. You may want to imagine



800-year-old traditions are alive and well today in Lo

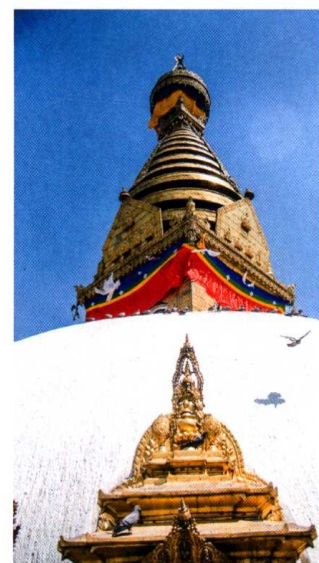
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it does so from advancing armies, but my guess is, it keeps them out of the far more treacherous wind.

It has taken us the better part of a week, while we maintained a casual pace, to ride up from Pokhara. That's five days of slush, rocks, water and sand, all dealt with from the saddle, and sometimes off it, a Royal Enfield Himalayan. There weren't necessarily showers after each of those days and the comfort of four walls had also been missing for the last couple of days. Am I glad I replied to that email, it's been every bit of the Mustang Adventure that was promised.

Five days ago, sitting by the poolside at a sprawling hotel in Nepal's second largest city, Pokhara, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. Google maps failed to find a motorable road into Mustang (pronounced Mushtaang, unlike the Ford), and YouTube wasn't very helpful either, with every other video captioned 'World's most dangerous road'. But then again, we couldn't wait to leave the balmy city behind. It didn't take long for the roads to disintegrate and gradually disappear, allowing the Himalayan to come into its own. The final petrol pump, where we'd hoped to fill up, was shut for business. There still was lemon tea to save the day, while the scenery swapped houses for trees, the mountains climbed towards the sky and the river grew wider. ➤

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With rocks providing the only break from the mud-packed trails, my first crossing of the Kali Gandaki river, a major tributary of the Ganges, arrived. Having lost the rest of the group, I wasn't quite prepared to drown the Himalayan all by myself. I decided to wait until some locals came past and followed quietly. Having reached Kalopani with a view of the Dhaulagiri and the Annapurna ranges, we turned in for the evening. Mustang Valley had shown itself and I couldn't wait to explore what lay ahead.

Having managed to miss all road closures on day one, we began day two with news of one a short distance from our overnight halt. With time on our hands, some made their way to the river bed to look for some 'shaligram', priceless fossils, on the banks of the Gandaki while the rest crossed the river for sport, this time using a suspension bridge. With news of the road opening to traffic, the hunt for shaligrams was called off and we headed deeper into Mustang valley. We rode along the Gandaki, on the riverbed, for a while and passed the picturesque hamlet of Marpha and the last airport in the region, at Jomsom. Having filled up the Himalayan, with petrol being poured out of 'Bisleri' bottles at grocery shops, and had our fill of lunch, it was time to cross over into the great big expanse of upper Mustang.

The passage was marked by a rather unassuming bridge that took us to the other bank of the Kali Gandaki. With every passing kilometre, however, the greenery grew steadily stunted till it ceased to exist altogether. What remained were sparse blades of grass in an arid desert. Kagbeni, our stop for the night, had other surprises though. Apart from the fantastic coffee, which seems to characterise every other café in the Mustang region, it is home to the best burgers you'll come across. And sinking your teeth into one after bouncing around on your motorcycle for hours makes it extra special. With the sun fading behind the mountains I took a walk around the narrow lanes. A distinct transition in culture was underway, Tibetan-Buddhists now took over from the Nepalese-Hindu way of life. With that, their skin grew more weathered and the lines on their faces more etched, while children with their runny noses blushed a deeper red in ►

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RE HIMALAYAN



**“With a view of the
Dhaulagiri and Annapurna
ranges, Mustang Valley
had shown itself”**



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these surroundings.

Arriving at the deep gorges of Chele the next day, we had a choice to make. Cross the Kali Gandaki seventy-odd times to make our way up or take the high road and make our way towards the barren plateaus. A short excursion into the canyon showed that the river was simply too deep for the Himalayan or any motorcycle for that matter. There is a reason why this route is better left to SUVs and trucks and this wasn't the season to argue with it. Apart from the diminishing greenery, upper Mustang is also fiercely windswept. Making my way through sand tracks, often behind a group, ensured I kept getting blasted with sand as my jacket kept adding layers of camouflage to it.

When we finally did turn out of the wind, we found ourselves perched on a rock shelf staring at ice melt trying to make its way down to the gorge. No wind here, or sand, just an endless field of rocks. Despite the 21-inch front wheel on the Himalayan, there were enough recesses to catch the bike out. Add to that enough altitude to rob it of half of its 24 horses and there was plenty of rocking and shoving to get it up and over. Unfortunately, these run-offs ended in steps cut out in the mountain side. Tricky bit of riding to say the least. Easy to stall at, but impossible to stop at. Getting on the brakes will only get the bike to

slide, often towards the cliffside, and leave you with little option other than dropping the bike on its side. With twenty of us riding, not too far apart from each other, we always had help close at hand. With plenty of clutch slippage and leg power, I did make it up along with the rest of them to carry on towards the wide open plateau.

There was a final hurdle on our way to Lo Manthang though. Sand bunkers, with depths that were impossible to gauge, would come up sporadically. Some would let the Himalayan forge a path through with no hassle while some others would make it sink. A tumble here ensured that the camouflage on my jacket was complete and there was more to chew on than just apple pie. The Himalayan though made it without missing a beat. With all of its bits intact and a layer of dust for effect, it arrived at the promised land. That evening, after I'd found a shower that was less than lukewarm, I watched the many layers in the striated mountains change colour. This with monks who performed various routines with drums, cymbals and horns, to rid the kingdom of Lo of demons. The crowds cheered as the shadows grew longer and I zipped my jacket further up.

One half of the Mustang adventure was done, now to prepare for the return. ▢

